The Iscin Religions and the Psychology of the Iscin Races

Preface

This essay tries to find a place for irrationality in Jorunian culture. The largely rationalist mindset of the humans of Burdoth or Jasp often appears little different from that of a 20th century Westerner. This makes roleplaying easier for 20th century Westerners (compared to, say, playing a Tsolyani in Tekumel) but to many feels unsatisfactory, and the near absence of religious or spiritual life is one of Jorune's least convincing features. Reintroducing Terran religions seems a bad way to solve the problem: making Jorune like Terra is making matters worse. But there are the Iscin religions. What about them?

The twin presences of isho and Earth-Tec on Jorune are powerful enough to dominate beliefs in matters beyond everyday experience. Both appear close to magic, and most superstitions and mystical frameworks will probably involve one or the other. Earth Tec may be suited to 'cargo cult'-type religions in more obscure parts of Jorune (Thantier perhaps?) but in this essay I have concentrated on isho and how it might influence the Iscin Religions, with some speculations about the psychology of the Iscin races. I hope to move on to religion, superstition and spirituality in the human cultures in some later essay. Needless to say, all the ideas here are my own, apart from those stolen from other people or simply lifted from the official version. They do not contradict what has been published, but have no official status: use or disregard them as you please.

Overview

All five races created by Iscin (blount, crugar, woffen, bronth. tologra) have beliefs about their creation. (In the case of blount, these beliefs are not sophisticated enough to merit discussion, and so my survey begins with the crugar.) These sets of beliefs become religions when they state the meaning or purpose of existence, and how best to live in accordance with that purpose. All share the idea that Iscin was more than just an ordinary human (no other human has created life), and that their creations were in some way meaningful, or manifestations of a higher purpose. Each race has its own ideas about what this purpose might be, and there are always those within the race who believe differently from the majority. The strongest version of this higher-force idea identifies the planetary isho as the Great Force, and sees the creation of the Iscin races and the human variants (muadra, boccord, salu, acubon) as different aspects of one process driven by the influence of isho.

Crugar

Mainstream crugar thought sees the crugar as the eldest Children of Iscin, disregarding the blount who are 'merely a failed early experiment'. The primary responsibility for remembering and interpreting the teachings of Iscin therefore rests with the crugar, oldest and most numerous of the Iscin races. The teachings of Iscin are preserved in the holy book Chaul-Iscin-tse, which only the priests (chen-ichi) may handle and interpret.

Many chen-ichi use this idea of responsibility as a justification for crugar supremacism, teaching that Iscin intended the crugar to run Jorune according to his principles of responsibility, loyalty, self-sufficiency and honour. According to this view, the woffen and bronth could not accept the natural seniority of the crugar, and chose to rebel against them after Iscin's unfortunate death. (Some do not even accept that Choundra accidentally killed Iscin, and instead insist that he died at the hands of Bomoveris the anti-Iscin, sent by the humans to destroy Iscin and his works.) In rebelling, the other Children rejected the true teachings of Iscin and set up teachings of their own to suit their selfish purposes, accusing the crugar of murdering Iscin and enslaving them. Their false teachings must be destroyed and the honour of the crugar avenged.

The more moderate crugar argue that even if the crugar are the sole holders of the accurate Iscin teachings, which is not certain, Iscin certainly did not intend war between his creatures, and it is incumbent on the crugar race to work out these misunderstandings with their fellow Children peacefully. Similarly, the bronth may be incorrect in saying that the teachings of Iscin included a prohibition against slavery, but even so, that does not mean that slavery is acceptable in a civilised society. Crugar can afford to recognise truths outside of the Iscin teachings, and must do so if war is to be avoided.

Unfortunately, much of the crugar population sides with the supremacist view. This is partly because it is easy to understand, and conveniently self-aggrandising, but also because the naturally passionate and intense crugar disposition finds almost any rigid or extreme position instinctively attractive. The cygra generally uphold the moderate position, but are less numerous, and their relative placidity does not predispose them to the role of charismatic leader. Crugar revere the memories of those who have united the crugar clans, such as Chaln Dolcha, and these have all been supremacists: as yet, there have been no great crugar moderates.

Most crugar believe in a spirit-based afterlife, in which all the crugar who have ever been linger still about their Temauntro homeland, regardless of where they were born and died. Temauntro, which centres about the city of Chaln Imagri, is a holy land to be defended to the death, as if the crugar were to be dispossessed, the ancestors would have nowhere to live. The spirits of once-great crugar watch over the living, rewarding honourable behaviour, and punishing the cowards and traitors who betray the teachings of Iscin. To avoid offending these most powerful spirits, or to make amends for misdeeds, shrines are dotted about the Temauntro countryside, each dedicated to a single crugar spirit. Here offerings can be made of food, wealth or fur shaved off by a chen-ichi at the shrine, usually in a symbolic shape. Wandering into one of these shrines by accident, looking for shelter, has been the death of more than one unsuspecting human traveller. Almost all the shrines can be found in Chaln Imagri, though if a penance is to be severe, city chen-ichi may well impose a pilgrimage to a more distant shrine. This belief in the enduring power of dead supremacists, and their veneration, also reinforces the fundamentalist nature of crugar Iscin belief, and makes reform difficult. Some sects also believe in the possibility of reincarnation among crugar: just as it is written in the Chaul-Iscin-tse that Iscin will one day return to judge his Children's progress, so these sects believe that great leaders will return in new bodies to unite the crugar race, and a variety of divinatory and cabbalistic methods are used to try to discover secret signposts to when and how this might happen.

Overall, the crugar are a superstitious race, although few humans penetrate far enough into their culture to realise this. Since the spirits of the ancestors are constantly involved in everyday life, crugar culture is full of traditions about omens and signs and their significance. For instance, to see seven of any animal in a group is considered to be a sign of good fortune, as the ancient warrior Chontra is watching over you and your family. Conversely, to see a dothobider with a missing horn is an indication that you have offended that spirit, and you should go to his shrine and make an offering as soon as you can, or at least recite some traditional lines of praise to his memory if no shrine is near. For this reason, it is very common to see a crugar staring at the ground and muttering under his or her breath. They are not crazy, merely trying to preserve their luck. Some of these superstitions are shared by the cygra, but are not generally taken quite so seriously.

Bronth

The bronth version of the Iscin teachings accords with the crugar in the matters of responsibility and honour, but also includes an explicit teaching that slavery of one Iscin race by another (or indeed by a non-Iscin race) is totally forbidden. That the crugar broke this teaching after Iscin's death is sure proof of how far they had wandered from the path even before Choundra and Bomoveris between them conspired to kill the Creator. Bronth also have an Iscin teaching about the sacred nature of the birthing process, with which no-one should interfere. They consider the crugar to have dropped the instructions of Iscin which they found inconvenient, only keeping those that they could interpret in ways which were compatible with crugar dominance. Few non-crugar would argue with this point of view.

The bronth mind excels at seeing patterns, especially large-scale patterns. For this reason, they are avid students of history and of myth, forever seeking parallels between the present and the past. This area of study is wide, and may also include astronomy, meteorology, linguistics, and geometry. To the bronth mind, everything has a cause, and therefore a meaning: there is no word for 'coincidence' in Boru. Bronth are born conspiracy theorists, and when you see one pacing around his house, muttering 'Of course! It all makes sense!', it may be best to depart swiftly, or face several hours of explanations as to why the shapes traced out by the seven lunar orbits provide the key to understanding why the thriddle like giggit whereas cleash prefer eating spirric. Other races generally lack the patience or motivation to engage in this kind of esoteric research; the bronth consequently feel that they are the only ones really trying to understand the whole universe, and everyone else is rather preoccupied with inconsequential stuff.

It was this kind of convoluted logic which originally persuaded the bronth to sail for Crendor, accompanied by the tologra, who trusted their judgement. The woffen liked the bronth, but had little patience for their esoteric ideas about why they should travel across the ocean, when an obviously reasonable place to settle was available here and now. As another example, the radical school of thought that all Iscin races are of a spectrum, shared by the muadra and boccord, which represent the manifestations of a single Great Force emanating from the planetary Isho, is the invention (they would say, discovery) of one society of bronth scholars and prophets, the Thortjo Illumination.

In contrast to the crugar attitude to the Iscin teachings, the bronth version is printed and to be found in almost every bronth household, in Dobre or elsewhere. They have no priesthood as such, but the title of Bar+han Iscin is given to those who pass public examinations in the lore of Iscin, and demonstrate an exemplary lifestyle. They are then qualified to officiate at Iscin ceremonies to mark birth, adulthood, marriage, death and other occasions of importance. The title is highly respected; conversely to be stripped of it for misconduct is a grave dishonour.

An aspect of bronth thought which is unique to them is the interest they take in dreams. Bronth spend a lot of time sleeping, and discussion of last night's dream is a common topic of conversation between family members and good friends, akin to asking after someone's health in human circles. Some dreams are felt to be fortunate dreams of good omen, such as flying or dreams about Iscin, others, such as dreaming of helplessness or illness, are thought to indicate trouble brewing. This is not an entirely superstitious idea: the bronth feel that the insight into their subconscious afforded by their dreams is a good gauge of whether they are living according to healthy principles. If a dream seems particularly obscure, a troubled bronth may well consult a local dream scholar or

'hobha+sanhaht'. Remarkable dreams have even given rise to prophecies.

It is noteworthy that the bronth dwell more than the other Iscin races on the topic of Iscin's eventual return in some form. There are many prophecies about this return, as there are about a lot of bronth topics, all based on some pattern the sage in question discerned in the events of the past. Most famous is the prophecy that when Iscin returns, it will be to a bronth nation fractured by disunity, then destroyed by a foe from afar. Many human observers find it difficult to see why, if the bronth believe so strongly in this possibility, and fear it, they do not try harder to break the patterns of civil war which have ravaged Dobre in the past, but instead constantly prepare for internal strife.

The answer lies in the bronth tendency to paranoia, because of their liking for large-scale patterns. As hard as they try to achieve a measure of peace between the various great families, the schools of prophecy and the academic institutions, (to say nothing of the various clubs and societies, some of which are quite Masonic in their outlook), sooner or later some bronth will awaken having had an extraordinary dream, which when interpreted will lead another bronth to realise that unless Rubha the Fat is frustrated in his ambition to run the public library at Hawtows, a chain of events will be set in place which will inevitably lead to the destruction of Dobre. Surely he must be stopped, without alerting his allies in the Thortjo Illumination. Thus yet another conspiracy is born, which when entangled with four or so other schemes to stop the holocaust from breaking out, leads sooner or later to another bohor+ahandi. Only a stable national government with a open system of governance holds any real possibility for long-term peace, and even this would offer plenty of scope for conspiracy and secret alliance. Unfortunately, the bronth dislike of tyranny leads them to keep all power at the local village level, with only defence of Dobre being nationally organised.

The bronth are also fascinated by the legend of the lost Children, the tologra. This is partly because they were the last race to see the tologra before their parting at sea in the great storm on the way to Dobre. But it is also because the bronth tend to feel that Iscin improved his creations as he went along. The blount were stupid, the crugar crude and violent, the woffen far more civilised but prone to indulgence and short-sightedness, and the bronth have none of these vices. According to this logic, however, the tologra would be even better than the bronth. Although few bronth would ever express the thought that way, that is what lies at the back of their minds when they speculate as to what the tologra were like, and what may have become of them. On the occasions that bronth and tologra have met, this insecurity on the part of the bronth makes them uneasy, and the tologran certainty that they are perfection incarnate exacerbates the problem. The bronth become vague and distrustful, the tologra unusually impatient. It is not a great success. Very few of the bronth who encountered the tologra who were persuaded to fight for the ramian realised what they were seeing. Of those who did, some were profoundly shocked and could not accept what they saw, and even those who did were not believed by their fellows. The idea that the superior tologra would side against the bronth with the utterly abhorrent ramian, even in ignorance, is too much for most bronth to swallow.

Woffen

The woffen mind loves to rank and categorise. Like their ancestors the wolves, they are uncomfortable with the notion of equality between things or beings. Woffen are happiest when they know their relationship to those around them, and understand their place within it. It is for these reason that they make excellent soldiers, much better than the more violent crugar, who are unable to form disciplined units with a clear chain of command, only rabbles of varying size. This hierarchical instinct can also serve them well as scholars, compiling exhaustive lists and classifications of everything they study. To the bronth scholar, this careful ranking and hairsplitting seems rather like stamp-collecting, when the secrets of the universe could be divined instead. To the woffen, much of what the bronth dream up seems like idle speculation with little basis in reality. A woffen and a bronth in partnership, however, have complementary strengths and may produce excellent scholarship between them.

The basic Iscin principles are not in dispute between woffen and bronth. They too hold the crugar as wrong-doers at the time of Iscin's death, but unlike the bronth, try to keep more of an open mind about the modern-day crugar. Blaming the offspring for the sins of the parent is seen as foolish in woffen culture. Although the sanctity of birthing is not written into the woffen Iscin texts, it is very much part of woffen culture, which holds the family in high regard, and children as especially precious. Many woffen do not take the Iscin religion as seriously as those of other races do. Although its principles are respected, and the name of Iscin is often invoked at ceremonies that mark rites of passage in woffen culture, active worshippers are a minority, and religion is regarded as a private matter in Lundere society.

The active minority, however, are quite interesting. They have picked up on the ideas promulgated by the bronth Thortjo Illumination, that the Iscin races are the product of the planetary Isho, and linked this to the shanthic influence on Lundere, where most woffen settled after the death of Iscin. They believe that the woffen were created to guard the shanthic lands, until the shantha return for them in numbers, when they will be rewarded and given a new homeland. This puts the woffen in some sense in the centre of that world-view, as the shanthic return is seen as being the destiny of the planet, and the woffen its agents. The leaders of these groups have a priesthood, which inevitably is very hierarchical. Some of these woffen have established small communities in the east of Lundere, where a monastic devotion to 'chanting' (howling, to humans), the study of the moons and planetary Isho, and other fields of scholarship, is combined with martial training to act as defenders against those who would desecrate the shanthic realms. Highly organised and powerfully motivated, they resemble the knightly Orders prominent during the Crusades on Earth. Human explorers should be very careful here.

Woffen are more immersed in the world of their senses than are the bronth. Like the crugar, their instinctive behaviour patterns are strong, and this is why they are more susceptible to addictive behaviour, such as uncontrolled stomeh drinking, than the bronth or tologra. Crugar have a physiology which makes alcohol a less pleasant experience for them, or they would be just as vulnerable. On the other hand, woffen are instinctively monogamous, whereas crugar are instinctively promiscuous, and this makes their societies more peaceful than would otherwise be the case. Crugar are easily moved to anger: certain sights or smells are just intolerable to them. Woffen on the other hand are more easily prone to finding things just unbearably attractive. If you ask a crugar what her pawm is like, she will likely reel off all the things about it that most annoy her. A woffen is more likely to start off with what is good about a situation, then regretfully note the drawbacks. When woffen cannot be enthusiastic about life, they become quiet and depressed. Crugar get angry and go looking for someone to blame.

Referees can pass this aspect of woffen psychology on to their players by the way the describe the world. What seems to a human PC like a good-quality steak can be described to a woffen PC as just the best smelling thing they have found all day. It makes them drool, and their guts rumble. Similarly, if a woffen who collects carved crystals sees a good one in a market, it's not unreasonable to request a roll of some sort before you let the player ignore it and walk on. "Well, you meant to keep walking, but somehow you seem to be having a discussion with the merchant about how much it costs instead. Thirty yules, apparently. Seems like a bargain!"

Tologra

The tologra, like the bronth, believe that Iscin improved his creations as time went by. They, accordingly, are the pinnacle of his work; the crowning glory of the Iscin races. Living on an island cut off from the other Iscin races has made this view the easier to sustain. The few tologra that have made it to the outside world have been astonished when they discovered that they could be outsmarted by a woffen, or perhaps wrestled to the ground by a bronth. For this reason, the tologra find the company of all other Iscin races disturbing: they are simply not as inferior as they ought to be. Humans are not so much of a problem, although their teachings rather rule out accepting humans as part of Sharden society, and humans bearing Earth-Tec are a source of fear anywhere.

The six principles of Scanchi, the tologran Iscin religion, are described in the 3rd edition book. They include the bronth prohibition on slavery, though not the sacredness of birthing, although they would agree that certainly birthing is important. The betrayal of the crugar remains strong in their culture, as though it happened only last year. In many ways, Scanchi is frozen in time compared to the other Iscin religions. The woffen and bronth have had ongoing experiences of what crugar are actually like. These experiences have not always been happy, but have led to their prejudices being tested and sometimes modified. Tologra have had no such contact. This makes the chances of peaceful meetings between the two races slim, both being quick to anger, and neither regarding surrender as honourable. The crugar and tologra also each believe themselves to be the most important of Iscin's creations, for opposite reasons, a situation likely to end in tears.

The tologra are the least instinct-driven of the Iscin races, but the trade-off is that instead they are driven the harder by ideas and social pressures. The woffen (well, most woffen) are just too much party animal to hold to a rigid system of beliefs. The tologra have no such problem, and most take the Principles of Iscin very seriously. The tologran view of themselves as all-rounders, and their lack of social cohesiveness, can put great pressure on a tologra to excel in all fields, without a network of support when she fails. Although tologra do not have the pessimistic crugar outlook, their contemplative self-examination can lead them into a downward spiral at difficult times, and absence of family and friends can lead to feelings of complete inability to cope. Such tologra typically drop everything without warning, and go for a very long walk, trusting in the challenges of survival in the wilderness to restore their sense of worth. Another option is to enter one of the centres of Scanchi and pursue a meditative monk-like existence until things improve. This is one of the few places in Sharden where a tologra is guaranteed a support network, and many elderly tologra retire to these centres to mentor younger tologra in difficulties. More sense of humour would make the tologra stronger beings, able to laugh at themselves when fate casts them down, but this they largely lack: jokes are not part of tologran culture. Even the crugar have jokes, largely centred on the activities of fools. To tologra, acting the fool is too horrible to joke about.

Iscin Psychology: a handy Table

Race	Strengths	Weaknesses
Bronth	Visionary Imaginative Patient	Paranoid Dreamy Boring
Crugar	Passionate Idealistic Stubborn	Hot-tempered Illogical Ruthless
Tologra	Confident Self-controlled Self-reliant	Arrogant Too Serious Introspective
Woffen	Relaxed Socially Skilled Tolerant	Low Self-control Need Hierarchy Lack Persistence